CHAPTER 2

THE CASE FOR COLLUSION

Hybrid Warfare

1999–2016

Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was not a unique nor singular event. Rather, it represents part of that country's broader strategy toward the West, one that has been largely defined by the man in charge for most of the past two decades: Vladimir Putin.

SPYMASTER IN CHIEF

Just as President Donald Trump's history in real estate shaped his worldview, biographies of Putin, such as Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy's *Mr. Putin*, Masha Gessen's *The Man Without a Face*, and Karen Dawisha's *Putin's Kleptocracy*, emphasize how the Russian president's background as a KGB officer in the waning days of the Soviet Union shaped his political philosophy. As a former spy, they demonstrate, Putin places a high value on espionage and intelligence as foreign policy tools, and his governments have funded those tools accordingly.

Putin's service in the KGB came at a pivotal moment not just in his own life—he joined in 1975, at age 22—but also for the Soviet Union. After training in Leningrad, he served in Dresden in East Germany from 1985 to 1990. In East Germany, Putin cultivated potential assets in the west and countered western agents in the east. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Putin was leading the KGB's office when protestors massed outside its gates. As KGB officers frantically burned government documents to ensure that they would not fall into protestors' hands, Putin went outside and threatened the protestors with violence if they breached the gates. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin was left searching for a new career outside of the KGB. He returned to Russia, serving as an adviser and later deputy chairman in the government of St. Petersburg before becoming part of the national government in Moscow.

As his biographers note, Putin's trajectory through the government also inculcated in him an antipathy toward democracy and the West. Where America and the West saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union as democratizing moments, to Putin, it humiliated the once mighty Soviet Union, ended his career, and introduced chaos into a previously stable system. The 1990s, during which he sought to reestablish his foothold in the Russian government, were marked by coup attempts, economic crises, and a weak state. Many in Russia—Putin by most accounts included—blamed this on the unbridled capitalism and corrupt privatization of industry that was backed by America and the West. As a result, it is no surprise that since Putin assumed the presidency in 1999, his responses to major world events

reflect a worldview that sees Western-style democracy and liberalism as a geopolitical threat.

PUTIN'S PRESIDENCY

Putin's tenures as president, as well as the interregnum when he was prime minister from 2008 to 2012, have seen popular uprisings undermine Russia's influence abroad, followed by responses from Putin that reaffirm his antipathy toward popular protests and liberal democracy. These include not only the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, which deposed or endangered pro-Kremlin leaders, but also the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East that began in 2010. Putin, ascribing these uprisings to the CIA and U.S.-backed nongovernmental organizations, responded by expelling the Peace Corps and restricting foreign funding of NGOs in Russia.

Putin reportedly became further convinced that the United States was trying to undermine his authority in 2011. After a wave of liberal uprisings in the Middle East that year, Russia held parliamentary elections in December, which were plagued with widespread allegations of fraud from both the Russian electorate and international observers. Russian citizens took to the streets in the largest demonstrations since the fall of the Soviet Union. When Hillary Clinton, then the U.S. Secretary of State, raised "serious concerns about the conduct of the election" and called for a "full investigation" into its legitimacy, Putin blamed her specifically for the protests. "She set the tone for some actors in our country and gave them a signal," he said. "They heard the signal and with the support of the U.S. State Department began active work" to undermine him and his government, according to Putin.

Putin's antipathy toward the West boiled over after the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine. Although Putin has never been shy about using force to subdue neighboring nations—the country launched cyberattacks against Estonia in 2007 and invaded Georgia in 2008—Russia's actions against Ukraine in 2014 nevertheless marked a turning point. After Ukrainian citizens ousted the government's notoriously corrupt pro-Putin leader Viktor Yanukovych, the Kremlin seized on the ensuing chaos to illegally annex Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and invade its eastern Donbass region.

Russia's attack on Ukraine took multiple forms. Along with the military occupation, Russia spread pro-Russian propaganda about the ongoing conflict through its state-run outlets, including the television networks RT and Sputnik, as well as via Kremlin-linked bots and troll farms. The Russian government had been financially supporting Yanukovych's regime; after the invasion of Crimea, the Kremlin also began funding separatist groups in an attempt to solidify its hold over the region.

The West, including the United States, retaliated against Russia's aggression in Ukraine swiftly. Within two weeks of the invasion, the United States and several other countries sanctioned Russian state-backed institutions, including the energy giant Rosneft and the development bank Vnesheconombank, further angering Putin.

Two additional events may have contributed to Putin's ire toward the United States and his decision to launch a campaign to disrupt the 2016 election. In 2012, the United States enacted the Magnitsky Act; the law permitted the U.S. government to sanction government officials implicated in human rights abuses, allowing a crackdown on Russian officials who were involved in torture and who sought to hide their money in the United States. By going after the very people on whose support Putin's power depends and whom he promised to protect in exchange for that support, these sanctions represented a direct threat to Putin's regime. As a

result, the repeal of the Magnitsky Act has been the primary foreign policy objection for Russia and the Putin government; they have campaigned against both the law and its most visible proponent, the investor Bill Browder. Browder has suggested that Putin himself may have personally benefited from the financial crimes that led to the human rights abuses that in turn led to the Magnitsky Act's passage—crimes the Kremlin denies happened in the first place.

Then, in May 2016, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists leaked thousands of documents from a Panamanian law firm showing how wealthy and corrupt individuals use shell corporations to hide their money from authorities. The leak revealed, among other things, that one of Putin's closest associates, the cellist Sergei Roldugin, owns a network of shell companies hiding roughly $2 billion, prompting speculation that Putin may have been using Roldugin to hide portions of his personal fortune. The Kremlin's response to the leak was to attack the project, known as the Panama Papers, as "an undisguised paid-for hack job" against Putin; privately, however, Putin reportedly again blamed Clinton for the threat to his personal wealth and power.

ACTIVE MEASURES: WAR BY OTHER MEANS

Since 2014, Russia has escalated its confrontation with the West. The resulting strategy has been dubbed many things by different analysts: "hybrid warfare," the "Gerasimov Doctrine," "political warfare," and "active measures"—this last one being a reference to the KGB term for political and information efforts that fall between traditional espionage and public diplomacy. One of the key pillars of this strategy is to use the openness of Western democracy to undermine governments from within, a goal achieved through three often simultaneous lines of effort, outlined in the following sections.

CULTIVATING FRINGE MOVEMENTS AND LEADERS IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

In recent years, the Kremlin has supported—financially and otherwise—candidates, parties, and causes in several countries. The clearest example of a Kremlin-backed political movement in a Western democracy is France's National Front party, whose leader Marine Le Pen rode a crest of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant fervor to a second-place finish in the country's 2017 election; the party received loans of €11 million from the Kremlin-linked First Czech-Russian Bank in 2014. Le Pen not only continually praised Putin throughout her campaign but actually traveled to Moscow in March to meet with the Russian president. Her campaign also benefited from Russian hacking and release of emails from the campaign of her opponent, Emmanuel Macron. However, in part due to France's moratorium on media coverage of candidates in the last 44 hours of an election, the leak appears not to have had its intended effect. Other European political movements with links to the Russian government include Brexit and its chief advocate Nigel Farage; the far-right German party Alternative for Germany; the Freedom Party of Austria, which signed a cooperation agreement with Putin's party to act as an intermediary between Putin and Trump; and the Catalan independence movement, which has received significant support from Russian trolls, bots, and state television.

Russia has also supported multiple political movements in the United States. While most of the attention on the subject has gone to Putin's support for Trump's presidential campaign, there is also evidence that the Russian government has backed other fringe causes as well. For example, secessionist movements in both California and Texas have reportedly received office space, online support, and funding to attend conferences from sources with ties to the Russian government. Through the state-owned television station RT, Russia also provided the left-wing Green Party with a media platform during the 2016 election. Presidential candidate Jill Stein

became one of the channel's top commentators during the campaign and was prominently featured as counterprogramming to mainstream coverage of the presidential debates and election night. Stein has denied any knowledge of Russian interference but has only partially complied with government requests for documents related to her campaign.

The common thread in the groups that Russia supports is not discrete policy goals but rather Russia's attempts to co-opt the movements in order to undermine democratic institutions and traditional sources of stability in the West. The European nationalist parties the Kremlin appears to support frequently argue against their countries' membership in the European Union and NATO, both organizations Putin openly rejects; separatist movements threaten countries' stability from within. Meanwhile, Jill Stein and the Green Party's critique of American democracy—that the two-party system is inherently and irredeemably corrupt—fits nicely with Russia's goal of ensuring Trump's election in 2016.

WEAPONIZING THE RUSSIAN OLIGARCHY

As the Center for Strategic and International Studies report "The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe" describes, the Russian government "has cultivated an opaque network of patronage across the region that it uses to influence and direct decision-making." Under Putin, the Kremlin has developed a codependent relationship with the country's oligarchs, many of whom accumulated their wealth through illegal or ethically questionable means after the Soviet Union's dissolution. The otherwise kleptocratic Kremlin allows these oligarchs to retain their wealth through the understanding that they will act on Putin's behalf. Their duties in this regard range from elaborate displays of obeisance to, as "The Kremlin Playbook" explicates, developing corrupt financial relationships with politicians and businesspeople throughout Central and Eastern Europe to assist the Russian government in achieving its policy goals.

"The Kremlin Playbook" focuses mainly on countries in Central and Eastern Europe, many of which are or recently were emerging democracies and members of the Warsaw Pact. However, there are indications that the Kremlin has pursued similar strategies in the West as well. For example, Arron Banks, a British financier who was one of the biggest funders of the campaign for the U.K. to leave the European Union, reportedly received multiple lucrative business offers from Russian diplomats and businesspeople in the lead-up to the Brexit referendum. Banks has denied any wrongdoing, and there is no evidence he was involved in a direct quid pro quo with Russia. His associate Andy Wigmore, who—according to leaked emails acted as a conduit for Banks, has claimed his only communications with the Russian government came in his capacity as a representative of the government of Belize. However, their actions comport with both the means of Russian interference and the Kremlin's broader goals of supporting nationalistic politicians and undermining the European Union. Underpinning the entire Trump-Russia scandal is Trump's long business history with Russian oligarchs, which raises the possibility that he may have been cultivated in the same way for years, if not decades.

EXPLOITING THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT TO SOW DISCORD AND INFLUENCE LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

The 2016 U.S. presidential election revealed the Kremlin using many of the cybertools that they developed to influence campaigns. State-run media, most famously RT and Sputnik, support the Kremlin's favored candidates from platforms that, to those not aware of their provenance, are difficult to distinguish from mainstream news networks. Paid troll farms and bots spread and amplify messages on candidates' behalf, purchasing advertisements on social media. And hackers supported by the Russian government illegally gain access to opposing candidates'

emails and other files and leak damaging information through cut-outs—or intermediaries—such as WikiLeaks.

Though the Kremlin tries to build plausible deniability into its techniques, such as by laundering leaks through third parties, and officially denies that it interfered in the 2016 election, it has in other ways been more upfront about its cyberoperations. For example, in February 2016, Andrey Krutskikh, a senior Kremlin adviser on cybersecurity, gave a speech at the country's national information security forum that, in retrospect, eerily presages how Russia pursued its influence campaign in the 2016 presidential election. Speaking to his Russian audience, Krutskikh reportedly said:

> *You think we are living in 2016. No, we are living in 1948. And do you know why? Because in 1949, the Soviet Union had its first atomic bomb test. And if until that moment, the Soviet Union was trying to reach agreement with [President Harry] Truman to ban nuclear weapons, and the Americans were not taking us seriously, in 1949 everything changed and they started talking to us on an equal footing. I'm warning you: We are at the verge of having "something" in the information arena, which will allow us to talk to the Americans as equals.*

Whether Krutskikh was specifically alluding to Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 presidential election remains unclear. But a year after he made his remarks, it was clear to the U.S. intelligence community that the capabilities he was referring to in the "information arena" had, indeed, changed the geopolitical equation.